DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 359 UD 028 862

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TITLE Reflections on Black Consciousness and Afrocentrism.
PUB DATE Feb 92
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Achievement; Black Culture; Black Education; Black History; *Black Influences; Black Studies; Curriculum Development; Higher Education; *Intellectual Disciplines; Racial Discrimination; *Racial Identification; Racial Relations
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; *Afrocentrism

ABSTRACT

This essay offers reflections on Black consciousness and Afrocentrism in the United States, especially as movements in education. The paper opens by recalling the history of oppression and rejection that influences the African American heritage. Next, the essay traces some highlights in the development of ideas of race consciousness from the early part of the 20th century on. In connection with this theme, it is asserted that Black history has been continually distorted, ignored, and suppressed within the academic community and the educational establishment. The paper traces the development of Afrocentrism and explores its use in education as well as the development of African American studies. A further look at the relation between cultural groups in the United States and the role of Western ideas in the formation of the nation looks at an "Anglo-Saxon conformity model" and a melting-pot model and discusses their limitations. The final section discusses the challenges facing African American scholars and teachers who must maintain scholarly integrity. In addition, the conclusion treats the future of African American disciplines at the nation's universities suggesting that acceptance of this discipline will be resisted and will continue to make slow progress. (JB)

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REFLECTIONS ON BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND AFROCENTRISM

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FEBRUARY, 1992

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African Americans are the largest minority group in America; Black Americans number almost 30 million, about 12 percent of the nation's population. Black Americans or African Americans are drawn from a diverse range of cultures and countries in Africa, later from the Caribbean and from Central and South America. Black Americans share a history of enslavement, transplantation, acculturation, and racial oppression which gives relevance to the initial bond of African heritage. Being Black in America means not only being racially and culturally different but also being perceived as racially and culturally inferior. Black Americans were exposed to laws, regulations, policies, and beliefs which emphasized their alleged inferiority to White Americans. For centuries the Constitution's references to justice, welfare, and liberty were mocked by the treatment meted out daily to Black Americans by all three branches of government. (1) The comprehensive and systematic racial discrimination--250 years of slavery and more than 100 years of racial discrimination after slavery--denied Black Americans equal protection under the law and created the political, economic, and educational disadvantages which continue to impair the life chances and the educational lot of Black Americans.

The use of race theory to give legitimacy to the establishment of a socioeconomic pattern of segregation and discrimination against Black Americans provided the ideological camouflage to support the claims of differences between Blacks and Whites in intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities. (2) This race theory posited that there was anthropological and ethnical evidence to indicate there was a connection between Blackness and evil and that Blacks were incapable of learning and must be protected from their natural immorality. (3) Every adult Black person in America on numerous occasions in his or her life is called upon to somehow reject or deflect from himself or herself the association of evil and inferiority so powerfully attached to Blackness in America; it is no small miracle that Blacks in every succeeding generation have found the ego strength to meet and resist these identifications. (4) The educated and the illiterate and the weak and the strong among Black Americans were all informed of their presumed inferiority to White Americans. (5) Former Secretary of the Army, Clifford Alexander asserts that Whites continue to paint pictures of Black Americans that determine our opportunities. He states: "You see us as less than you are. You think that we are not as smart, not as energetic, not as well suited to supervise you as you are to supervise us..." (6) Benjamin E. Mays, former President of Morehouse College, noted in Born to Rebel that his was a life-long quest--without complete success--to be judged on the basis of what you are, on what your potentials are, and on what you aspire to be. (7)

Although most of the legal forms of racial discrimination have been abolished in America, racism remains a determining factor in shaping the life chances of Black Americans. Black Americans remain in a struggle to avert their subjugation as a race. The pace of social reform in America, in general, and of significant improvements in the condition and treatment of Black Americans, in particular, is excruciatingly slow at best. At worst, it is retrogressive. Race and racism cannot be relegated the America's "social problems morgue." Racism in America is much more complex than either the conscious conspiracy of a power elite or the simple delusion of a few ignorant bigots; it is a part of the common historical experience and therefore, a part of our culture. (8) The three greatest contradictions in the American democracy are racism, classism, and sexism; with the possible exception of sexism, there is little cause to believe that any of these areas are declining in significance.

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois expressed concern about Black Americans living in a society that yielded them no true self-consciousness but that allowed Black Americans to see themselves through White Americans. (9) Three decades later in 1933, Carter G. Woodson declared that it may be of no importance to Black Americans for them to be able to boast of more educated members than they had in 1865, if they were the wrong kind. (10) In 1984, the Task Force on Academic and Cultural Excellence of the National Alliance of Black Schools Educators (NABSE) declared that Black students must be given an opportunity to experience an appropriate cultural education which honors and respects the history and culture of Black people and noted that ignorance of and disrespect for African American history and culture breeds low expectations for and unhealthy assessments of Black students. The Task Force proclaimed that a Black consciousness should permeate all aspects of the education of Black students. (11) In June, 1986, the then President of Howard University, James E. Cheek, announced that all undergraduates at Howard University, a predominantly Black institution, would be required to pass a course in African American Studies. He noted that this requirement was necessary because so many students at Howard were "abysmally ignorant of the role of Blacks in America." (12)

The self-confidence of Black students is a "delicate web, woven of filaments of courage and family experience, of perceived valuations from others, of social accident, and a host of other influences." (13) Black students cannot be ignorant of or lack respect for their own unique cultural group and be able to meet others in the nation and the world on equal footing. Black students need to gain a knowledge of and a pride in their own history and culture in order that they can go on to discover that at the core of every distinct culture are the common imperatives of all humankind. (14) The view that Black students' have of the present is, in part, a function of their understanding of the past; their view of history provides the background against which Black students understand or fail to understand what transpires day to day in their personal lives and in society as a whole. (15) An understanding of African American history and culture informs Black students of where they have been and what they have been, and most important, an understanding

of African American history and culture tells Black students where they still must go and what they still must be. (16)

DuBoise reminded Black Americans more than a half century ago of the need for Blacks to develop pride and the ability to control the social forces that shape their environment. DuBoise called for a special brand of power which comes from pride in the accomplishment of Black people and the development of competence in all facets of Black public life in America. (17) Tilden J. LeMelle notes that the ideology of Blackness, as reflected in the concept of Black Power, is a positive reaction to the "dead end" philosophy and practice of assimilation/association type of integration. (18) LeMelle states: "the ideology of blackness posits as its instrumental goal the acquisition of Black Power, for in any society, the legitimacy and maximization of a group's values and interests are a function of that group's power to deal effectively in its own behalf." (19) Black power is the mobilization of Black social, economic, and political muscle as the force necessary to raise Black Americans above the social, political, and economic constraints imposed upon them by White Americans. Black consciousness is Black Americans demonstrating through a host of manifestations a positive sense of their African American history and culture. Black consciousness, projected in concert with the principles of the American democracy, is a logical and legitimate basis for social behavior. Nevertheless, a nation which has established, sanctioned, and perpetuated discrimination against Blacks based on the ideology of White supremacy and Black inferiority has to view Black consciousness and Black Power as a threat to those institutions and practices that have thrived on racism.

The ideal of Black consciousness suggests that periodically in their history, Black Americans must become keenly aware of their common history, their common heritage, and their common predicament as Black people in America. Maulana Kerenga asserts that without the intellectual freedom produced by the intellectual and political emancipation of Black Americans, the White monopoly over Black minds will never be broken. (20) Kerenga notes that it is this very emphases on academic and social relevance in the education of Black Americans that not only gives African American studies its raison de' entre but also generates much of its major opposition. It is the role of Black scholarship to create and constantly revise the formalized framework which guides the assessment and evaluation of reality for African Americans. African American studies evolved, in part, because Black scholars wanted to correct the errors, distortions, and omissions which had been generated about Black people by White scholars. (21) White historians generally ignored Black people in their treatment of American history, and when they did consider Blacks, their work was impaired by White supremacy. (22) Much of what passed for sound objective scholarship in history and the social sciences was until fairly recently characterized by gross and systematic distortions in terms of issues of race and ethnicity. (21) As a result of the subjugation of Africans, their past has been distorted or simply omitted from libraries and curricula. (23) African American Studies is committed to rewriting American history, reconceptualizing the essential features of American society,

and establishing the intellectual and academic space for Black people to tell their own story. (24)

Advocacy for Afrocentricity is a response to the fact that while public education espouses inclusiveness of all groups, in reality, the decisions affecting the operational aspects of public education are and have been the "sine quo non" of White Americans. (25) Historically, the message public education has communicated to Black students is that the history and achievements of Black Americans are not "integral to the real learning that goes on in the schools: real knowledge remains the domain of Whites." (26) Black scholars, particularly those affiliated with African American Studies, have declared that Black Americans can no longer tolerate schools which while teaching Black students about the contributions of White Americans, observe only minimally and derisively the contributions of Black Americans in every field of endeavor; thus failing to education White and Black students in any meaningful way. Black scholars committed to African American Studies perceive Afrocentricity as a means of "revising the white majority's intellectual terrain."

James Rogers states that Afrocentrism is an important new educational emphasis on African and African American experience and contributions to human culture. (27) He believes that Afrocentrism presents necessary and positive values for all and does not necessarily exclude other points of view like the dominant Eurocentric viewpoint. Ed Wiley emphasizes that Afrocentrism is not a Black version of Eurocentricity because it does not attempt to legitimize the African perspective by suppressing other viewpoints. (28) Molefi Kete Asante asserts that Afrocentricity is not the opposite of Eurocentrism nor does it seek to replace Eurocentrism. (29) Asante stresses that Afrocentricity does not deny others their places; it is a totally different orientation to reality based on harmonious coexistence of an endless variety of cultures. He believes that Afrocentricity should take its place not above but alongside of other cultural and historical perspectives. Asante notes that without Afrocentricity, African Americans would not have a voice to add to multiculturalism. Robert Harris sees Afrocentrism as a means to an end, rather than an end itself; it is a means to multiculturalism and awareness, understanding and appreciation of the roles that different people have played in the development of world civilization and in the world civilization and in the growth of the United States. (30)

Vincent Harding cautioned that no educator should be permitted to ignore that the acquisition of knowledge and the affirmation of self are the beginnings of the long battle against the systems that have created the domination of Blacks. (31) The civil rights struggle and the Black consciousness movement of the 1960's produced the demand for African American Studies courses and programs in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities. African American Studies serves not only to provide a "multidisciplinary body of knowledge which is contributive to the intellectual and political emancipation of Black Americans." (32) African American Studies and the students it develops have a role in the definition, defense, and development of Black interests in America. (33) It is the role of

Black scholarship to create and constantly revise the formalized framework which guides the assessment and evaluation of reality for African Americans. In the first editorial of the first Black newspaper in America in 1827, the editors stated: "We wish to plead our cause. Too long have others spoken for us." (34)

Leroi R. Ray identified the primary role of African American Studies as: (1) researching distortions in various disciplines, (2) investigating the norms and values of the university, (3) examining the disciplines and their omissions, (4) bring the Black experience to each discipline, and (5) monitoring the effects of each on racism. (35) Ray offered six objectives for African American Studies:

1. Assist students in developing a positive sense of identity and self concept.

2. Assist students in learning more about the status of Blacks in their environments.

3. Provide students with skills, information, and knowledge of resources available for conducting effective services to the Black community.

4. Create and expand knowledge for the improvement of the quality of life.

5. Teach students how to research, study, analyze, and debate the critical issues for survival.

6. Make the university a more just institution.

Black students and faculty have voiced increased resentment and protests about "too little reflection of their cultural heritage and history within the curriculum and a seemingly indifference to their presence." (36) Support for pluralism and multicultural education requires coming to grips with the question of whether or not the ideal of pluralism can find working expression in "institutions deeply grounded in the traditions of white America." (37) Schools, colleges, and universities should reject any "hierarchy of cultural values that places the achievement of Europe as some classical apex and relegates those of other cultures to a lesser status." (38) Educational institutions should implement curricula that embrace an understanding of cultures world-wide and that broaden students' understanding of the arts, humanities, and the social sciences beyond Western cultures. The content of a curriculum should be based on sound historical scholarship with a rejection of any history that "asserts or implies the inherent superiority of one race, gender, class, or region of the world over another." (39) Educators should be appreciative of and adaptable to the acquired experiential backgrounds that students

from different cultural groups bring with them into schools, colleges, and universities and should accommodate and capitalize on the lifestyles of students from different ethnic and racial groups by adopting a multicultural base and by changing those assumptions and practices that are antithetical to that concept.

Vivian Gordon notes that African American Studies, in its quest for a place of legitimacy among the disciplines in higher education, confronts a Eurocentric cultural imperialism which narrowly defines excellence in terms of a return to the "classics" and a presumption of Western world supremacy of thought and learning, as well as domination of civilization. (40) A defining characteristic of Western culture has been its opposition to the representation of any minority person or idea; the fear and repression of minorities is a dominant theme of Western civilization. (41) Because the American society is undeniably rooted in a Western historical tradition, this requires some intellectual familiarity with but not necessarily adherence to, the philosophies of the Greeks and those of the European tradition. (42) The ideas and values of the Western tradition should constitute the foundation of public education in America. But this does not mean that students need to accept the precepts of Western tradition as absolute truths. All students need to develop the ability to understand, respect, and accept people of different racial, cultural, religious, political, economic, and social backgrounds. Students need to be introduced to the scholarship of the last two decades that offers theory, analysis, and description of the perspectives and contributions of peoples who have been marginalized within the European tradition and peoples originating in Africa and Asia or in the indigenous cultures of the Americas.

The manner in which schools, colleges, and universities respond to the educational needs of the nation's various ethnic, racial, and socio-economic groups is shaped, in large measure, by the values and priorities established by the dominant groups in the American society. From the very beginning, public education functioned as the society's chief instrument in the attempt to fuse culturally different populations into a narrowly defined concept of the American culture. Students were subtly and not so subtly informed that they were to change their ways and not emulate their parents. Prior to the twentieth century, the nation's public schools were implored to "break up the ethnic enclaves and implant among the new immigrants an Anglo-Saxon concept of righteousness, law and order, and popular government. (42) The Anglo-Saxon conformity model gave way in the early part of the twentieth century to the "melting pot" ideal. The "melting pot" ideal envisioned an America of the future which would represent a blend of many cultures and a unified version of the American culture--not fragmented into nationalities and not purely Anglo-Saxon. Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans were not deemed worthy of serving as racial and ethnic contributors to the "melting pot" because it was believed that they would contaminate the American culture. Both the Anglo-Saxon conformity model and the "melting pot" ideal presumed a prescription for determining what an American ought to be. Efforts to mold a "fixed and final" American failed because Americans, regardless of color, national origins, and socioeconomic class, manifest a firm

desire to maintain their cultural ties. Americans prefer to blend into the mainstream of society while preserving their "distinctiveness and originality." Integration in the American democracy is pluralism--rather than assimilation--with respect for differences and is not a desire for amalgamation.

The "melting pot" ideal falsely implied that there was a consensus culture in America; a way of life which all Americans can learn, subscribe to, and live by. (44) Both the Anglo-Saxon conformity theme and the "melting pot" myth produced ethnic and racial self-hatred with all of its debilitating socio-psychological consequences, including family disorganization, crime, alienation, juvenile delinquency, and poor school attendance and performance. (45) Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans are raising serious questions about the adequacy and equity of educational opportunity and about the veracity and integrity of a curriculum which ignores, neglects, and distorts their history and culture. In the overall efforts to improve the life chances and the educational lot of Black students, the reclamation and restoration of African American history and culture must be priorities that are equal in importance to all others. (46) For Black students, appropriate access to knowledge about their history and culture and appropriate inclusion of the contributions and circumstances of Africans and African Americans in the mainstream culture are not "pleasant luxuries" but the very "marrow" of survival of African Americans in a racist society.

Black scholars in African American Studies engage the fundamental issue of how to address the persistent elements of racism in instruction and instructional materials. They, more so than other Black scholars, have accepted the difficult and controversial task of correcting the distortions and omissions in the coverage of Africans and African Americans in schools, colleges, and universities. A long standing body of impeccable scholarship exists upon which to base African American Studies. Black scholars must address the distortions and omissions of mainstream scholarship with good scholarship and not with pleasant distortions. John R. Howard asserts that Black scholars have no need to resort to myths and that there should be no fear that good scholars will do so. (47) All history that is not written from scholarship is bad history and should be unacceptable in any educational institution. Scholarly integrity requires all scholars to be truthful about the ignominious as well as the glorious aspects of American and world history. (48) Twisted scholarship and divisive behavior are repugnant and dangerous, regardless of the color, creed, or cause of the practitioner. All, who teach in African American Studies programs and who otherwise serve as instructional proponents of Afrocentricity, confront the pedagogical challenge of how to teach the best you know and attend to the truth and to accomplish this objective without doing violence to the canons of scholarship. All Black scholars who believe that the term Eurocentric means the teaching of history from a perspective so narrow that it distorts the truth and obscures the complexity of history must counter any measures that lead to Afrocentric becoming a Black version of a White distortion of history.

African American Studies remains in its definitional stage, struggling for legitimacy in an inhospitable environment. There are two certainties about change in education: it will come slowly, and it will be resisted. Norman Harris observes that the struggle of African American Studies is not remarkable because it took male White academians an extraordinarily long time to accept anthropology and sociology as legitimate disciplines. (49) Robert Harris believes that the opposition of traditionalists to African American Studies is derived, in part, from "an unwillingness to alter old practices: and a desire to maintain an unearned privileged station in life." (50) In the quest for full recognition as a respected discipline in higher education, the interdisciplinary nature of African American Studies has to be appropriately resolved. African American Studies covers diverse aspects of "intellectual terrain," including that which might otherwise fit under history, the humanities, and the social sciences. There is a need for theory in African American Studies that transcends how theory in an established discipline can be narrowly applied to the Black experience. Maulana Kerenga said it best when he noted that African American Studies must establish itself as a legitimate, respected, and permanent discipline and must answer its critics with critical research, solid intellectual production, and effective teaching. (51)

Truth may indeed be the satisfaction of the intellect. Scholarly inquiry in search of new knowledge is intellectually stimulating. But it also can be psychologically and socially discomforting. There can be no guarantees that scholarly inquiry will culminate in knowledge that reinforces prior values and beliefs or in findings that resolve differences rather than intensify differences. Nevertheless, colleges and universities should be experiment stations, where new ideas may germinate and be allowed to grow, if they will, into part of the intellectual food of the nation and the world. (52) Every discipline has its false prophets and zealots. As long as scholars in African American Studies teach in schools, colleges, and universities, they in their contacts with their students and colleagues are bound by the principle that legitimate goals do not justify improper means. Scholars in African American Studies should be held to the same standards of academic integrity and conduct and to the same checks and balances which are applied to their colleagues in the traditional disciplines--no more and no less.

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